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***Fertilis in mortes*: Lucan's Medusa and Milton's Sin**

Abstract

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This article attempts to show whether, and if so, to what extent, John Milton's portrayal of Sin in *Paradise Lost* is underlain by Lucan's so-called "Medusa excursus". Scholars have shown beyond reasonable doubt that Milton's depiction of Sin alludes to one particular English hypotext, namely Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. However, although the Lucanian character of Milton's epic is now generally acknowledged, the "Medusa excursus" has, to date, not been considered to be a possible Latin hypotext for Milton's depiction of Sin.

Leaving aside the indisputable similarities between Spenser's Error and Milton's Sin, the author shows that for all their apparent differences, Sin and Medusa actually have much more in common than it would seem at first glance. Firstly, both monsters are allegories of some primeval evil that, having set in motion a never-ending process of destruction, is portrayed as being a deadly, oxymoronic fertility that brings forth death instead of life. The morbid procreative prolificacy of both Medusa and Sin is triggered by a crime, which, once it has violated their bodies, renders them eternally "fertile in death". While Medusa, having been mutilated by Perseus, posthumously "gives birth" to poisonous snakes, Sin, violated by Satan, literally becomes the mother of Death.

Although it is highly likely that the motif of monstrous fertility has itself been taken directly from Spenser, it would seem that Milton may also have been inspired by Lucan. The name of Cerberus, which is present in Milton and Lucan, but absent

in Spenser, is a telling detail. Milton's depiction of Death, which is described as being shapeless and similar to a substance, brings to mind Medusa's poisonous blood. The subsequent rape of Sin by Death results in the birth of a pack of infernal dogs. This element also follows the Lucanian pattern of a crime triggering a deadly procreation by a wronged party.

Interestingly, Spenser's depiction of Error itself contains certain motifs (for example that of "black poison" or that of the killing of a monster by a warrior) that are also present in Lucan's Medusa excursus. This, together with some possible allusions to Hesiod's legend of the rape of Medusa, as well as Ovid's account of Scylla, leads us to conclude that the relationship between the discussed passages of *Paradise Lost* and their Lucanian and Spenserian hypotexts are quite complex, as they seem to reflect a process of elaborate contamination.

It is shown that Lucan's depiction of Medusa may also have inspired Spenser himself. The connection between the portrayals of Medusa and Sin is not limited to the seemingly vague and superficial similarities that mainly concern the physical appearance of the two monsters, but is deeply rooted in the moral concept of a crime that triggers a *perpetuum mobile* of destruction. Although Milton and Spenser both share Lucan's idea that one wrong leads to the "birth" of innumerable wrongs, only Milton consistently follows this line of thought by providing his monster with horrendous procreative powers that are also eternal and (literally) deadly. Seen against the background of Milton's familiarity with the work and ideas of the Roman poet, it would seem that all the similarities between Sin and Medusa are far too striking to be attributable to mere coincidence.

Key words: Lucan, Milton, Spenser, *Pharsalia*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Faerie Queene*, Sin, Medusa, Error, fertility, death, serpent

Though hitherto practically ignored, the similarities between John Milton and the Latin poet Lucan have recently been the subject of growing academic interest. Since the days of Cecil Bowra – who completely omitted Lucan in his study of *Paradise Lost*¹ – and Eustace Tillyard – who merely touched on the question of the relation-

¹ Cf. M. Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton*, London 1945.

ship between the *Pharsalia* and Milton's poem² – some time has had to pass before scholars have begun to see the extent to which Lucan's epic underlies that of Milton.³

More recently, David Norbrook and Edward Paleit have given a fairer assessment of Lucan's influence by showing that he occupied a very important place in the minds of his literary emulators in England.⁴ Paleit blames the „Vergil-centrist” attitude adopted by scholars in the twentieth century and earlier for the fact that the *Pharsalia* – which indeed is as anti-Virgilian and anti-Caesarist as Milton's work is anti-royalist⁵ – was for so long either totally ignored or at the most

² Cf. E.M.W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and its Background*, London 1954, pp. 94–99.

³ Cf. E. Paleit, *War, Liberty, and Caesar: Responses to Lucan's Bellum Ciuile, ca. 1580–1650*, Oxford 2013. See also: D. Quint, *Epic and Empire*, Princeton 1993, p. 7; John Milton, *Paradise Lost Books IX. and X.*, ed. by A. W. Verity, Cambridge 1962, p. 111; *Paradise Lost, 1668–1668. Three Centuries of Commentary*, ed. by E. Miner, W. Moeck, S. Jablonsky, Cranbury, NJ 2004; B.K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton. A Critical Biography*, Oxford 2003, p. 448; H.J.M. Day, *Lucan and the Sublime. Power, Representation and Aesthetic Experience*, Cambridge 2013, p. 13. Scholars who have closely examined certain connections between the *Pharsalia* and *Paradise Lost* include William Blissett, whose article on the subject was published a year after he had examined Lucan's influence on Elizabethan tragedy (Cf. W. Blissett, *Lucan's Caesar and the Elizabethan Villain*, SPh 53, 4 (Oct., 1956), pp. 553–575; P. Hardie, *Lucan in the English Renaissance*, [in:] *Brill's Companion to Lucan*, ed. by P. Asso, Leiden 2011, pp. 491–506). In an article, he shows quite convincingly that one of the major inspirations for the figure of Satan in Milton's poem was Lucan's portrayal of Julius Caesar (Cf. W. Blissett, *Caesar and Satan*, JHI, vol. 18, nr 2 (Apr., 1957), pp. 221–232). Most recently, Ivana Bičak has undertaken a further investigation of this intertextual relationship, but from a slightly different point of view (Cf. I. Bičak, *Transmutations of Satan and Caesar: The Grotesque Mode in Milton's Paradise Lost and Lucan's Pharsalia*, *Milton Quarterly* 49, 2 (May, 2015), pp. 112–125).

⁴ Cf. D. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic. Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics 1627–1660*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 23–62, 433–495; E. Paleit, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁵ For Lucan's anti-Virgilianism see: S. Casali, *The Bellum Civile as an Anti-Aeneid*, [in:] P. Asso (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Lucan*, Leiden 2011, pp. 81–110; E. Narducci, *Ideologia e tecnica allusiva nella 'Pharsalia'*, ANRW II, 32, 3 (1985), pp. 1538–1564; idem, *La provvidenza crudele. Lucano e la distruzione dei miti augustei*, Pisa 1979; idem, *Lucano. Un'epica contro l'impero. Interpretazione della*

treated as a minor and almost insignificant source for *Paradise Lost*⁶. Norbrook for his part offers an extensive comparison between the two epics, showing just how much Milton owes to Lucan.⁷ He also points out that *Paradise Lost* – exactly like the *Pharsalia* – “demonstrates how republican ideals can become corrupted by personal ambition”,⁸ Satan being – as he argues – to some extent associated with Cromwell.⁹

As *Paradise Lost* to some extent follows the thematic pattern of the *Pharsalia*¹⁰ – the subject of each epic being a revolution against some *ancien régime* (Caesar against the Roman Republic and Satan against God) – the similarities between them naturally go far deeper than the portrayal of the villainous main characters.¹¹ Milton, for example, includes a couple of terrifying monsters that are somewhat reminiscent of the fantastic creatures depicted by Lucan. The presence of monsters is, of course, a traditional feature of epic poetry. The *Odyssey* abounds in terrifying creatures such as Scylla or Polyphemus. The *Aeneid* also contains accounts of monsters, such as the story of Laocoön, who – together with his sons – is devoured by hideous sea serpents (2.199ff.), or Aeneas’s encounter with the revolting personifications of diseases, worries, hunger, old age and other misfortunes that inhabit the entrance to Pluto’s palace (Verg. *Aen.* 6.274ff.).¹²

“*Pharsalia*”, Roma – Bari 2002. See also: J. Pyplacz, *When Legends Come Alive*, Kraków 2015.

⁶ Cf. E. Paleit, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁷ Cf. D. Norbrook, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 442. Satan, however, can also stand for other political and ecclesiastic figures (cf. W.S.H. Lim, *John Milton, Radical Politics, and Biblical Republicanism*, Newark 2006, p. 115).

¹⁰ Cf. D. Quint, *op. cit.*, p.188; B.K. Lewalski, *op. cit.*, p. 448.

¹¹ Cf. W. Blissett, *op. cit.*

¹² Cf. C. Ware, *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition*, Cambridge 2012, p. 125.

However, Milton's monsters – i.e. Sin and Death, who appear in the second book (in the infernal debate scene during which Satan and his fellow demons resolve to corrupt and thus destroy mankind) – are much more than just typical episodic characters of an allegorical nature¹³ that appear in an epic poem. Their role in *Paradise Lost* – though somewhat similar to that of Virgil's Allecto (Verg. *Aen.* 7.330ff.) – is also very different. While the function of Allecto in the *Aeneid* is practically limited to destroying the peace of mind of Turnus and Amata, that of Milton's Sin and Death goes much further, as the first of these two monsters personifies the corruption of the whole of mankind, this being the main reason for its fall, which in turn is the subject of *Paradise Lost*.¹⁴

In this respect, Milton's Sin resembles Lucan's Medusa who – despite the fact that she actually appears only in one excursus – turns out to be one of the central figures in the whole epic, as her severed head functions as an allegory of the “murdered” Roman Republic¹⁵ – or perhaps as an allegory of the murder – *nefas* – itself. Moreover, the Medusa legend functions as a mythological *aition* of the Libyan serpents that bring disaster to Cato's army in Libya, while the terrifying story of Sin in *Paradise Lost* plays a similar illustrative role, as it is Sin who gives birth to Death, and – in parallel fashion – it is Eve's sin that brings mortality to mankind.¹⁶ Interestingly, even at first glance Milton's Sin bears some resemblance to the mythical Medusa.

¹³ Cf. M.A. Treip, *Allegorical Poetics & The Epic. The Renaissance Tradition to Paradise Lost*, Lexington 1994, p. 110.

¹⁴ Cf. *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Paul, *Rom.* 6. 23); J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Cambridge 1998, p. 129.

¹⁵ Cf. E. Fantham, *Lucan's Medusa-Excursus: Its Design and Purpose*, MD, vol. 29 (1992), pp. 95–119; E. Bexley, *The Myth of the Republic: Medusa and Cato in Lucan, Pharsalia 9*, [in:] *Lucan's Bellum civile: between epic tradition and aesthetic innovation*, ed. by N. Hömke and Ch. Reitz, Berlin – New York 2010, pp. 135–153. See also: M. Malamud, *Pompey's Head and Cato's Snakes*, CPh, vol. 98, nr 1 (Jan., 2003), pp. 31–44.

¹⁶ Cf. D. Clay, *Death in Milton's Poetry*, London – Toronto 1994, p. 18.

On the other hand, it is widely known that – apart from his possible ancient sources – Milton also had at his disposal a sixteenth-century English source, namely Edmund Spenser's unfinished epic poem entitled *The Faerie Queene*, which was first published in 1590.¹⁷ In his brilliant comparative analysis of the corresponding passages Marshall Grossmann analyses some significant thematic and lexical similarities between the portrayal of Sin in *Paradise Lost* and that of Spenser's famous allegorical monster Error, who appears in *The Faerie Queene*¹⁸ – similarities that were noted even in eighteenth-century commentaries on Milton's poem.¹⁹

The aim of this article is to discover whether Lucan's description of Medusa has by any chance served as a source for Milton's description of Sin – and, if so, to what extent. In order to do this, I shall first examine all the connections between the relevant passage of *Paradise Lost* and its probable Latin hypotext (i.e. Lucan's description of Medusa), though at the same time I shall also keep in mind Spenser's description of Error, which has been convincingly shown by Grossmann to have been Milton's English hypotext.

Both Sin and her "official" literary predecessor Error are loaded with philosophical, theological and ethical significance. Error functions as a graphic and even grotesque allegory of Christian errors (mostly Catholic),²⁰ being a monstrous personification of erroneous

¹⁷ Cf. E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton, 2nd ed. (revised), Harlow 2007, p. xviii. Other probable sources include Francis Herring's *Pietas pontificia*, at least as the "family romance" of Satan, Sin and Death (cf. J.N. King, *Milton and Religious Controversy: Satire and Polemic in Paradise Lost*, Cambridge 2000, p. 75).

¹⁸ Cf. M. Grossmann, *Reading Death and the Ethics of Enjoyment in Spenser and Milton*, [in:] *Imagining Death in Spenser and Milton*, ed. by E. J. Bellamy, P. Cheney, M. Schoenfoeldt, Houndmills – New York 2003, pp. 116–130, at 121.

¹⁹ Cf. *Paradise Lost. A Poem, in Twelve Books. The Author John Milton. The Seventh Edition, With Notes of various Authors, Thomas Newton, D.D. [...]*, London 1770, p. 143.

²⁰ Cf. Ch. Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation in Early Modern Britain and Ireland*, Oxford 2008, p. 39.

interpretations of the scriptures²¹ that are portrayed as being hilariously repulsive. Sin for its part personifies original sin and – at the same time – the never-ending and irreversible process of destruction that that sin has triggered.

Although she has nothing in common with Christianity, the Reformation or seventeenth-century theological disputes, Lucan's Medusa also illustrates a kind of *primaevae* evil that eventually brings forth calamity. This evil consists in putting an abrupt end to an old order by means of violence. Once violated in such an act of "original sin", it provokes an untold series of disasters. The graphic account of the horrible deaths of Cato's soldiers illustrates this mechanism. As Cato commits the sin of joining the *perpetuum mobile* of the Civil War ("facient te bella nocentem", 2.259), his moral transgression – just like that of Eve – requires retribution, which comes in the form of the Libyan disaster, the snakes symbolizing the *perpetuum mobile* of evil.

Apart from these general similarities between the ethical aspects of Medusa and Sin, there are also minor textual similarities concerning their physical appearance. In order to bring all of these to light, it is necessary to compare the corresponding passages of *Paradise Lost* with its English hypotext (*The Faerie Queene*) and also with the hypothetical Latin intertext (i.e. Lucan's *Pharsalia*) of one or both of the English poems.

Lucan

Hoc primum natura nocens in corpore saevas
eduxit pestes; illis e faucibus angues
stridula fuderunt vibratis sibila linguis.
Ipsa flagellabant gaudentis colla Medusae,
femineae cui more comae per terga solutae
surgunt adversa subrectae fronte colubrae
vipereumque fluit depexo crine venenum.

²¹ Cf. J. Kearney, *The Incarnate Text: Imagining the Book in Reformation England*, Philadelphia 2009, p. 96.

Hoc habet infelix, cunctis inpune, Medusa,
 quod spectare licet. Nam rictus oraue monstri
 quis timuit? Quem, qui recto se lumine vidit,
 passa Medusa mori est? Rapuit dubitantia fata
 praevenitque metus; anima periere retenta
 membra, nec emissae riguere sub ossibus umbrae.
 Eumenidum crines solos movere furores,
 Cerberos Orpheo lenivit sibila cantu,
 Amphitryoniades vidit, cum vinceret, hydram:
 (Luc. *Phars.* 9.629–644)

[In her body malignant Nature first bred these cruel plagues; from her throat were born the snakes that poured forth shrill hissings with their forked tongues. It pleased Medusa, when snakes dangled close against her neck; in the way that women dress their hair, the vipers hang loose over her back but rear erect over her brow in front; and their poison wells out when the tresses are combed. These snakes are the only part of ill-fated Medusa that all men may look upon and live. For who ever felt fear of the monster's face and open mouth? Who that looked her straight in the face was suffered by Medusa to die? She hurried on the hesitating stroke of doom and anticipated all fear; the limbs were destroyed while the breath remained; and the spirit, before it went forth, grew stiff beneath the bones. The tresses of the Eumendes raised madness only, Cerberus lowered his hissing when Orpheus played, and Amphitryon' son looked on the hydra when he was conquering it.²²]

Spenser

[...] his glistening armour made
 A little glooming light, much like a shade,
 By which he saw the ugly monster plain,
 Half like a serpent horribly displayed,
 But th'other half did woman's shape retain,
 Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain.
 (1.1.14, 4–9)

Her huge long taile her den all overspred,
 Yet was in knots and many boughtes upwound,

²² Transl. by J.D. Duff (Lucan, *The Civil War*, transl. by J.D. Duff, Cambridge MA – London 1928).

Pointed with mortall sting. Of her there bred
 A thousand yong ones, which she dayly fed,
 Sucking upon her poisonous dugs, eachone
 Of sundry shapes, yet all ill favored:
 Soon as that uncouth light upone them shone,
 Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone.
 (1.1.15, 1–5)

Milton
 [...] Before the gates there sat
 On either side a formidable shape;
 The one seemed woman to the waist, and fair,
 But ended foul in many a scaly fold
 Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed
 With mortal sting. About her middle round
 A cry of hell-hounds never ceasing barked
 With wide Cerberean mouths full loud, and rung
 A hideous peal; yet, when they list, would creep,
 If aught disturbed their noise, into her womb,
 And kennel there; yet there still barked and howled,
 Within unseen. [...]
 (2.648–659)

Although all three portrayals share the same motif of the monstrous hybrid of a woman and a snake, the similarities between the descriptions of Sin and Error are indisputable (e.g. “Her huge long taile her den all overspred” // “ended foul in many a scaly fold”; “pointed with mortall sting” // “armed with a mortal sting”).²³ Lucan's Medusa stands somewhat apart – and not only as far as her deformity is concerned. Unlike Sin and Error – creatures that are half women and half serpents and whose deformities are limited to the lower parts of their bodies – she retains her human form, barring the snakes which have replaced the hair on her head (“more comae per terga solutae surgunt [...] colubrae”). Moreover, Medusa's principal destructive force would seem to lie hidden in her eyes, which kill

²³ Cf. E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, s. 35. Cf. M. Grossmann, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

faster than the venom of the snakes growing out of her head, whereas that of Sin and Error – depicted by Milton and Spenser as hellish beings resembling Sirens – is the deadly sting of the serpent growing out of their abdomens.²⁴

The first difference between Sin and Error – which places her nearer Medusa than Error – concerns the human aspect of the monsters' physical appearance. Whereas Spencer describes Error as an extremely ugly and even repulsive creature ("Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain"), Milton's Sin has quite a beautiful face ("and fair"). Lucan does not say anything specific about the Gorgon's ugliness or beauty,²⁵ apart from posing the vague rhetorical question "for who would fear the monster's mouth and face?" ("Nam rictus oraue monstri quis timuit?"), which in any case most probably refers to the fact that instant death comes to anyone who dares to look at her.

Another significant detail is the fact that of Milton's two intertexts, only Lucan's poem mentions the name of Cerberus ("Cerberos Orpheo lenivit sibila cantu" // "With wide Cerberean mouths full loud") – a motif which is absent in Spenser. However, whereas Lucan merely mentions the infernal dog, with no further development (apart from the context of death – death being the result of any encounter with the Gorgon and Cerberus being the guard of the Underworld), Milton has developed this motif and, indeed, has exploited it to the full.

In Milton's account, Sin is accompanied by a pack of hounds with "wide Cerberean mouths". Somewhat grotesquely, these formidable

²⁴ Further on in the same excursus of the *Pharsalia*, however, the entire dead Medusa becomes venomous, with lethal poison oozing out of her mouth:

Quos habuit voltus hamati volnere ferri
caesa caput Gorgon! Quanto spirare veneno
ora rear quantumque oculos effundere mortis!
(9.678-680)

²⁵ For Medusa's ambivalent aesthetic qualities see: D. Lowe, *Medusa, Antaeus, and Caesar Libycus*, [in:] *Lucan's Bellum civile*: [...], pp. 119–134, at 124.

creatures take shelter in their mother's abnormally large womb ("would creep [...] into her womb, and kennel there"). Although Spenser makes no mention of Cerberus, it is clearly to him – not Lucan – that Milton owes the motif of offspring returning to their mother's body. In the description of Error, the monster is the mother of "a thousand yong ones" which, when frightened, conceal themselves in the depths of her mouth ("Into her mouth they crept").

However, while Error's offspring come in a variety of shapes ("eachone / Of sundry shapes"), those of Sin are all alike, consisting only of savage dogs that are somewhat reminiscent of another mythical monster: Scylla – depicted by Ovid as a creature with a virgin's face and a black womb 'surrounded by wild dogs' ("illa feris atram canibus succingitur alvum, / virginis ora gerens", Ovid. *Met.* 13.732–733).²⁶ As John King reminds us, in the Middle Ages Scylla symbolized the uncontrollable appetite of sin and was portrayed as such in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* 7.22–24) and also in *Ovide moralisé*.²⁷

It would therefore seem that Milton has contaminated his ancient, mediaeval and sixteenth-century hypotexts, merging the motif of Error's offspring with that of the mythical monsters: Scylla – from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* ("enriched" with mediaeval symbolism) – and Cerberus – mentioned by Lucan in the Medusa excursus. Interestingly, the two prevailing intertexts of this part of Milton's description of Sin – i.e. Spenser and Lucan – seem to have undergone a certain transformation, if not reversal. Moreover, whereas in the *Pharsalia* Cerberus is appeased ("lenivit") by the chant of Orpheus ("Orpheo [...] cantu") and in *The Faerie Queene* Error's children seem to have disappeared once they hide in their mother's mouth ("and suddain all were gone"), in *Paradise Lost* the opposite happens: the infernal,

²⁶ Cf. J.N. King, *Milton and Religious Controversy*, Cambridge 2000, p. 73; idem, *Milton's Cave of Error. A Rewriting of Spenserian Satire*, [in:] *Imagining Death in Spenser and Milton*, ed. by E.J. Bellamy, P. Cheney, M. Schoenfeldt, Houndmills – New York 2003, pp. 148–155, at 149.

²⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*.

Cerberus-like dogs howl and bark unceasingly, even after retiring to Sin's womb ("yet there still barked and howled").

In Lucan's epic the mention of Cerberus most probably serves only as a rhetorical indicator of the deadly nature of the Medusa, while in Milton's poem the mythical dog seems to have multiplied into a whole legion of terrifying infernal beasts. In the light of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans – according to which sin is the cause of death²⁸ – it would seem that Milton follows Lucan's line, given that in his description of Sin the Lucanian motif of the hellish dog – artfully combined with Ovid's Scylla and Error's offspring from Spencer's poem – serves to underline the deadly nature of sin.

As far as Error's children are concerned, scholars consider this part of the description to be reminiscent of Hesiod's account of the half woman, half serpent Echidna, who hated humankind and was the mother of (*nota bene*) Cerberus and other mythical monsters.²⁹ Indeed, serpent-shaped goddesses have always been associated with fertility and procreation, beginning with ancient Egyptian deities and ending with the legend of Melusina.

As regards the serpents themselves, in many ancient cultures (including those of the Mediterranean) snakes belonged to a group of animals associated with fertility cults.³⁰ In his *Elegy* 4.8, Propertius mentions the famous snake of Lanuvium, which was given special

²⁸ For Milton and St. Paul see: A. Ferry, *Milton's Epic Voice. The Narrator in Paradise Lost*, Chicago and London 1963, pp. 94–95.

²⁹ Cf. Hes. *Th.* 295–305. Cf. J. Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of the Faerie Queene*, Princeton 1976, p. 694; D. Brooks-Davies, *Spenser's Faerie Queene. A Critical Commentary on Books I and II*, Manchester 1977, p. 19. Further on Error, Echidna, and other aesthetically ambivalent creatures in: P. Hardie, *The Self-Divisions of Scylla*, *Trends in Classics* 1, 1 (May, 2009), pp. 118–147, at 132–133.

³⁰ Cf. B. Hayden, *Old Europe: Sacred Matriarchy or Complementary Opposition*, [in:] *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean. First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean. University of Malta, 2–5 September, 1985*, ed. by A. Bonanno, Amsterdam 1986, pp. 17–30, at 20.

offerings by virgins during the festival of Juno Sospita, the patron goddess of fertility:

Lanuvium annosi vetus est tutela draconis:
 hic, ubi tam rarae non perit hora morae.
 Qua sacer abripitur caeco descensus hiatu,
 hac penetrat (virgo, tale iter omne cave!)
 ieiuni serpentis honos, cum pabula poscit
 annua et ex ima sibila torquet humo.
 (Prop. *El.* 4.8,5–10)

[Lanuvium has enjoyed from of old the protection of an ancient serpent (an hour spent here on so infrequent a visit is well worth while). Where the sacred slope is reft by a dark chasm, at that point the offering to the hungry serpent makes its way – maiden, beware of all such paths – when he demands his annual tribute and hurls hisses from the depths of the earth.³¹]

In this poem, the formidable snake is not only the guarantor of a good harvest, but also the guardian of morality. The snake-god grants the fields its blessing on one simple condition: that the girl who brings the annual offerings be chaste (“si fuerint castae, redeunt in colla parentum, / clamantque agricolae «fertilis annus erit»”, 15–16). This *aition*, which seems to have little in common with the rest of the elegy,³² most probably serves to underline the fact that – as his hero complains later in the poem – his lover Cynthia has been unfaithful to him.³³ By means of this contrast between the chastity of the virgins bringing offerings and Cynthia's promiscuity, Propertius reveals his heroine's infidelity.

³¹ Transl. by G.P. Goold (Propertius, *Elegies*, ed. and transl. by G.P. Goold, Cambridge MA – London 1990).

³² Cf. M. Janan, *The Politics of Desire. Propertius IV*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2001, p. 115–116.

³³ Cf. J. Turpin, *Cynthia et le dragon de Lanuvium: Une élégie cryptique* (*Properce*, IV,8), REL 51 (1973), pp. 159–171; J.D. Noonan, *Sacra canam: Ritual in the Love-Elegies of Propertius IV*, CB 59 (1983), pp. 43–47; M. Janan, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

Notwithstanding the numerous similarities with Echidna, the homogeneous nature of Sin's canine offspring seems to be reminiscent of another of Hesiod's accounts, namely that of Medusa, which – along with Ovid³⁴ – also underlies Lucan's excursus. According to both ancient poets, the Gorgon's numerous children were born posthumously of their mother's blood:³⁵

Illa tamen sterilis tellus fecundaque nulli
arva bono virus stillantis tabe Medusae
concipiunt dirosque fero de sanguine rores,
quos calor adiuvit putrique incoxit harenae.
Hic quae prima caput movit de pulvere tabes
aspida somniferam tumida cervice levavit.
(Luc. *Phars.* 9.696–701)

[Though that land is barren and those fields give increase to good seed, yet they drank in poison from the gore of the dripping Medusa head – drank in from that savage blood a ghastly dew, which was made more potent by the heat and burnt into the crumbling sand. In this land the blood, when it first stirred a head above the sand, sent up the asp whose swollen neck puts men to sleep.³⁶]

Paradoxically, at one and the same time the soil of Libya becomes “sterilis” – as nothing can grow in it – and “fecunda” – as it becomes the cradle of the deadly serpents³⁷ or even their second ‘mother’, given that it physically ‘gives birth’ to them. The apparent “sterilitas” mentioned by Lucan therefore turns out to be a perverse “fertilitas”,

³⁴ Cf. Ovid. *Met.* 4.610–803. Cf. S. Wheeler, *Lucan's Reception of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, *Arethusa* 35, 3 (Fall, 2002), pp. 361–380, at 376; S. Papaioannou, *Epic Transformation in the Second Degree: The Decapitation of Medusa in Lucan*, *BC 9*, 619–889, [in:] *Lucan im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Ch. Walde, München – Leipzig 2005, pp. 216–236.

³⁵ Cf. Hes. *Th.* 280–281; Ovid. *Met.* 4. 785–786.

³⁶ Transl. by J.D. Duff.

³⁷ Cf. G. Cerri, *La place de la Gorgone: où est passée la tête de Méduse ? (Odyssée, XI, 627 et suiv.)*, *Gaia* 16 (2013), pp. 13–42; M. Clo, *La panoplie de Persée: fonctions de l'objet-attribut*, *Gaia* 16 (2013), pp. 43–58, at 47.

as the earth has not entirely lost its creative power. However, instead of creating life it has begun to create death in the form of monstrous snakes. Having been infected by the poisonous blood of the Gorgon's severed head, the soil of Libya – like the Gorgon – becomes lethally fertile.

Elsewhere in the Medusa excursus, Lucan even uses the expression “fertilis in mortes” in reference to the pestilent African air, which is also an abundant breeding ground for all manner of plagues (“Cur Libycus tantis exundet pestibus aer / fertilis in mortes”, Luc. *Phars.* 9.619–620).³⁸ However, this oxymoronic expression also applies to Medusa herself as the mythical source of ubiquitous death. For example, a little further on in the excursus Lucan describes her as being asleep. In that passage, such is the terrifying fecundity of the Gorgon that she even duplicates shadows while she sleeps (“pars iacet in medios voltus oculisque tenebras / offundit clausis et somni duplicat umbras”, Luc. *Phars.* 9.674–675).

Like Error – but also like Medusa – Sin is exceedingly fertile. Milton provides his reader with a meticulous account of the course of events that has resulted in the abnormal fertility of this monstrous female:

[...] but, familiar grown,
 I pleased, and with attractive graces won
 The most averse, thee chiefly, who, full oft
 Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing
 Becam'st enamored; and such joy thou took'st
 With me in secret, that my womb conceived
 A growing burden. [...]
 (2.761–767)

Both Medusa and Sin conceive their offspring as the result of a crime. In the case of the Gorgon it is murder, as the unfortunate

³⁸ Cf. M. Malamud, *op. cit.*, at 33.

Libyan princess is beheaded by a highly unheroic Perseus.³⁹ In the *Pharsalia*, the act of Medusa's decapitation is not related in terms of a heroic exploit, but as a dreadful crime which functions as a metaphor for Julius Caesar's 'murder' of the decaying Roman Republic.⁴⁰ The corruption of Medusa's nature metaphorically mirrors that of the Republic. However, corrupt as they are, the murder of either of them inevitably leads to a horrific *perpetuum mobile* of never-ending destruction.

For Lucan, murder by decapitation is loaded with symbolic meaning, referring as it does to tyranny, oppression and the loss of freedom. For Milton, an equally dreadful crime is that of incest, as he considers it to be one of monarchy's inherent attributes.⁴¹ In the political or historiosophic sense, therefore, Satan's incestuous rape of his daughter Sin can be treated as a parallel to Caesar's violation of the Roman Republic.⁴²

The nature of the offspring of both monsters is commensurate with the crimes that have been perpetrated against them. In Lucan's epic, the poisonous blood dripping from the Gorgon's severed head becomes the origin of the deadly serpents, while the womb of Milton's Sin – violated by Satan⁴³ – conceives a progeny (Death) that is as terrible as its father (who is also their grandfather). Thus, like Medusa and the soil of Africa – poisoned by the Gorgon's posthumous fertility – Sin is quite literally "fertilis in mortes" (or, in this case, "fertilis in mortem"):

³⁹ Cf. S. Papaioannou, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

⁴⁰ Cf. E. Bexley, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁴¹ Cf. B.T. Boehrer, *Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England. Literature, Culture, Kinship, and Kingship*, Philadelphia 1992, p. 137.

⁴² For the theme of boundary violation in the *Pharsalia* see: S. Bartsch, *Ideology in Cold Blood: Lucan's Civil War*, Cambridge MA 1997, p. 14ff.

⁴³ Cf. M. Green, *Milton's Ovidian Eve*, Farnham – Burlington 2009, p. 67; I. Haywood, *Romanticism and Caricature*, Cambridge 2013, p. 81; S. B. Dobranski, *Milton's Visual Imagination. Imagery in Paradise Lost*, Cambridge 2015, p. 66.

At last this odious offspring whom thou seest,
 Thine own begotten, breaking violent way
 Tore through my entrails, that, with fear and pain
 Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew
 Transformed; but he my inbred enemy
 Forth issued, brandishing his fatal dart
 Made to destroy. I fled, and cried out *Death!*
 (2.781–787)

The behaviour of the newborn child mirrors that of its father, as the painful birth – which results in the tearing of Sin's entrails – is clearly reminiscent of the rape of which her *odious offspring* is the fruit. This monstrous act of procreation, accompanied by a moral transgression of a criminal nature and also a severe and permanent mutilation of the mother's body, may be reminiscent of the *Pharsalia*, where Medusa brings forth her serpentine children as a consequence of her beheading.

By contrast, the procreation of Spenser's monster does not result from a crime, but – on the contrary – from a perfectly just deed (Error vomits her hideous offspring while she is being strangled by Red Cross, but before the knight eventually manages to behead her she intoxicates him so that he becomes temporarily incapable of fighting). Interestingly, however, she dies a death that is similar to that of Lucan's Medusa, being decapitated by the knight Red Cross ("he raft her batefull heade without remorse").⁴⁴

Just like Lucan's Medusa, Error is eventually killed by a warrior, while her death – also just like that of Lucan's Medusa – produces a hideous offspring. Her metaphorical progeny, though similar to that of the Gorgon, is much less terrifying, consisting as it does of a rather grotesque assortment of books, papers, eyeless toads and other unpleasant objects:

⁴⁴ Cf. M. Evans, *Spenser's Anatomy of Heroism. A Commentary on The Faerie Queene*, Cambridge 1970, p. 90.

Therewith she spewd out of her filthy maw
 A floud of poyson horrible and blacke,
 Full of great lumpes of flesh and gobbets raw,
 Which stunck so wildly, that it forst him slacke
 His grasping hold, and from her turne him backe:
 Her vomit full of bookes and papers was,
 With loathly frogs and toades, which eyes did lacke,
 And creeping sought way in the weedy gras:
 Her filthy parbreake all the place defiled has.
 (1.1,20)

Like Medusa, however, Error is also poisonous. Her deadly vomit, ejected a moment before her death ("A floud of poyson horrible and blacke"), resembles the poison of Lucan's snakes ("nigra [...] tabe", Luc. *Phars.* 9.772). We know that the myth of Perseus, together with the *aition* of the African serpents – revealed (after Hesiod) by Ovid ("Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros", Ovid. *Met.* 4. 801) and retold in an expanded version by Lucan – underlies the scene of Error's death in Spenser's epic.⁴⁵ It would therefore seem that this story has been used as an intertext both by Milton himself and by Spenser (the author of Milton's English hypotext).

One of the most interesting similarities between the passages which have been compared is the treatment of the subject of death by Milton and Lucan. Although death lurks in every line of Lucan's excursus and overshadows the whole ninth book of the *Pharsalia* (in which Cato's soldiers come to a horrible end as a result of their fatal encounter with the Libyan serpents), it never assumes the form of an allegorical figure. Milton, however, perhaps following the literary example of the Greek tragedian Euripides in *Alcestis*,⁴⁶ has endowed Death with a sort of "body":

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*; J.M. Walker, *Medusa's Mirrors. Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Metamorphosis of the Female Self*, Newark – London 1998, p. 121.

⁴⁶ The figure of Alcestis also appears in Milton's *Sonnet* 23 (line 2). More on this subject in: L. Schwartz, *Milton and the Maternal Mortality*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 156, 169, 171–174.

[...] The other shape,
 If shape it might be called that shape had none
 Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
 Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,
 For each seemed either, black it stood as Night,
 Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as hell,
 And shook a dreadful dart; what seemed his head
 The likeness of a kingly crown had on.
 (2.666–673)

Although in *Paradise Lost* Death – who follows his monstrous mother around and oppresses her with his incestuous lust – would seem to have a *physis*, he resembles a substance more than a person (“Or substance might be called that shadow seemed”). The notion of a deadly substance immediately brings to mind Medusa’s poison, which – exactly like Milton’s vague personification of death – also happens to be black (“Saepe quidem pestis nigris inserta medullis / excantata fugit”, Luc. *Phars.* 9.930–931).

In *Paradise Lost*, the birth of Death – which also resembles a kind of rape – results in a further act of incest: the hideous newborn rapes his own mother. The outcome of this is yet another pregnancy. This time, however, Sin gives birth not to one creature, but to a whole pack of bloodthirsty hounds that unceasingly torment their mother’s body:⁴⁷

I fled; but he pursued (though more, it seems,
 Inflamed with lust than rage) and swifter far,
 Me overtook, his mother, all dismayed,
 And, in embraces forcible and foul
 Engend’ring with me, of that rape begot
 These yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry
 Surround me, as thou saw’st, hourly conceived
 And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
 To me; for, when they list, into the womb

⁴⁷ Cf. W.B.C. Watkins, *Creation*, [in:] *Milton. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by L.L. Martz, New Jersey 1966, pp. 112–147, at 139.

That bred them they return, and howl and gnaw
 My bowels, their repast; then bursting forth
 Afresh, with conscious terrors vex me round,
 That rest or intermission none I find.
 (2.790–802)

This pattern is clearly very similar to that created by Lucan. Fertilized by Satan, Sin gives birth to Death, but then – ravished by Death – she conceives a numerous and deadly progeny. Death is reborn in the destructive animals which rack their mother's body.⁴⁸ In the *Pharsalia*, Medusa meets a similar fate: while she is alive, she is already endowed with reproductive powers ("duplicat umbras", 9.674). In addition, she "gives birth" to death by killing living creatures with her lethal gaze. However, after her death by the hand of Perseus she becomes exceedingly fertile and posthumously "conceives" innumerable deadly serpents which are born of her blood. Thus, both Sin and Medusa become "fertiles in mortes".

The theme of rape – present in Milton but absent in Lucan (who most probably left it out so that it did not interfere with the murder theme, which he wanted to highlight as strongly as possible) – is indeed part of the Medusa legend. According to the Hesiod, the unfortunate princess was seduced by the god Neptune (Hes. *Th.* 276–279), but in the Ovidian version of the legend romance has been replaced by rape ("hanc pelagi rector templo vitiasse Minervae / dicitur", Ovid. *Met.* 4.798–799).⁴⁹

Like Ovid's Medusa, Milton's Sin is raped first by her father and then – a second time – by the newborn son she conceived as a result of that rape. Finally, her suffering is compounded by a permanent

⁴⁸ For the cycle of death and rebirth in *Paradise Lost* see: S. Morrison, *The Accommodating Serpent and God's Grace in Paradise Lost*, SEL 49,1 (Winter, 2009), pp. 173–195, at 176.

⁴⁹ Cf. J.P. Rumrich, *Milton Unbound. Controversy and Reininterpretation*, Cambridge 1996, p. 77; J. Ziogas, *Ovid and Hesiod. The Metamorphosis of the Catalogue of Women*, Cambridge 2013, pp. 83–85.

physical deformity that turns what used to be a beautiful and desirable woman into a repulsive and frightening monster.⁵⁰ In Ovid's version, it is her hair that undergoes such a metamorphosis, while in Milton's version it is her womb. Significantly, both changes are of a reproductive nature and both crimes result in perverse and deadly procreation.

In the second book of Milton's epic, the excursus about the serpent-shaped Sin and her sinister son Death functions as a harbinger of the disaster that occurs later in the poem,⁵¹ where Satan – also in the form of a snake⁵² – tempts Eve to transgress against God's command. As a consequence of this transgression, the woman becomes "devoted to death":

"Oh fairest of creation, last and best
Of all God's works, creature in whom excelled
Whatever can to sight or thought be formed,
Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet!
How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,
Defaced, deflow'ed, and now to death devote!
(9.896–901)

Interestingly, Lucan uses a very similar compositional technique – that of a fearsome harbinger – in order to foretell future events.⁵³ The Thessalian witch Erichtho, who appears in the sixth book of the *Pharsalia*, is undoubtedly a portentous figure. Her physical appearance – and in particular her viperine hair, which resembles that of the Gorgon – is inescapably reminiscent of Medusa ("et coma vi-

⁵⁰ Cf. M. Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–93; J. P. Rumrich, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁵¹ In the 1667 edition the Fall of Man took place in the eighth book.

⁵² The connection between Satan and serpent is already established in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton compares his (anti-)hero to a sea monster (lines 1.200–208), cf. J. Milton, *Paradise Lost Book 1*, ed. by C. Vijayasree, New Delhi 2006, pp. 39–40.

⁵³ For Lucan's use of harbingers see: J. Makowski, *Oracula Mortis in the Pharsalia*, CPh 72, 3 (July 1977), pp. 193–202.

pereis substringitur horrida sertis”, Luc. *Phars.* 6.656; “vipereumque fluit depexo crine venenum”, Luc. *Phars.* 9.635).⁵⁴ Together with the theme of poison, which is present in both descriptions (“humanoque cadit serpens adflata veneno”, Luc. *Phars.* 6.491), the motif of viperine hair strongly links Erichtho with Medusa, who is another female monster.⁵⁵ The necromancer thus becomes the harbinger of the gruesome deaths of Cato’s soldiers, who are attacked by deadly serpents which are believed to be the progeny of the mythical Gorgon.

Apart from these traits, Erichtho – who scorns divine law, allies herself with infernal forces (“grata deis Erebi”, Luc. *Phars.* 6.513) and inverts the order of things (life and death in particular) – is an incarnation of sacrilege and sin.⁵⁶ Lucan depicts these infernal deities as being antagonists of the Olympians (“nosse domos Stygias arcanaeque Ditis operti / non superi, non vita vetat”, Luc. *Phars.* 6.514–515). This makes Erichtho resemble Sin, the daughter of Satan,⁵⁷ who is Heaven’s principal antagonist.⁵⁸

In creating the figure of Sin, Milton seems to have drawn his inspiration from several different sources, including the Bible (and in particular the book of Genesis), Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, mediaeval legends, Dante,⁵⁹ Edmund Spenser and – as the present analysis has attempted to show – the *Pharsalia*. The example of Milton’s treatment of the myth of Medusa shows that the role of Greek mythology – popularised by Ovid (whose French version entitled *Ovide moralisé* enjoyed great popularity at the time) – should not be underesti-

⁵⁴ Cf. A. Bucchianieri, *Faust. My Soul be Damned for the World*, vol. 2, Bloomington 2008, p. 368; J. Pyplacz, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ Cf. J. Pyplacz, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁵⁶ Cf. A. Loupiac, *Lucain et le sacré*, BAGB, 1990, vol. 3, pp. 297–307, at 304.

⁵⁷ Cf. W.B.C. Watkins, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵⁸ Cf. A.J.A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost and its Critics*, Cambridge 1964, p. 67. For Erichtho as a “creator of evil” see: J. Masters, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan’s ‘Bellum Civile’*, Cambridge 1992, p. 205.

⁵⁹ Cf. D. Quint, *Epic Tradition and Inferno IX*, Dante Studies 93 (1975), pp. 201–207, at 202–204.

mated.⁶⁰ It would be very difficult to decide which of these sources played the greatest role in the creation of the figure of Sin, as the hypotexts underlying this particular passage of *Paradise Lost* are in turn underlaid by their own hypotexts (an excellent example of this being the case of Spenser's Error and the myth of Echidna), which – to compound matters even further – they sometimes happen to share with the hypertext.

Our analysis of the portrayal of Sin in *Paradise Lost* has revealed that, although the similarities between the passage under discussion and Spenser's portrayal of Error are obvious and can hardly be disputed, Milton has contaminated this seemingly principal source with others – one of which is Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Each of these sources has served as an inspiration for a particular feature of the formidable monster, the result being a strange hybrid of various mythical creatures.

One of the most remarkable traits of Sin is her perverse fertility, resulting from a crime perpetrated against her body and resulting in the birth of a deadly progeny, including Death himself. Our analysis has shown that the theme of monstrous procreation is also present in Spenser's depiction of Error (who in turn may have been inspired by Lucan). However, it has a different moral significance. Whereas Milton and Spenser share Lucan's idea that a wrong produces other wrongs, only Milton strictly follows this line of thinking, making the procreative powers of his monster not only eminently monstrous, but also eternal and (literally) deadly. This – together with other, lesser traits – makes her very similar to Lucan's Medusa.

The role of Sin in *Paradise Lost* strongly resembles that of Medusa in the *Pharsalia*. Having been physically mutilated and then endowed with a perverse, oxymoronic fertility, both monsters function as allegories of never-ending evil. Milton's numerous alterations to Lucan's Gorgon (including the addition of biblical and religious meanings) –

⁶⁰ Another example is the birth of Sin, who, like Pallas Athena, leaps out of her father's head (*Out of thy head I sprung*, 2.758).

which are the natural effect of literary contamination – have not only kept her original features quite intact and easily recognizable, but have also made the most important of them – i.e. Medusa's perverse fertility, which results in paradoxically deadly reproduction – even more powerful and even more frightening.

Being a staunch republican, Milton could hardly have failed to understand the political allegory concealed in Lucan's Medusa excursus. Sharing the same anti-monarchist ideals, he would seem to have made the most of certain details by adapting them to his own purposes. He thus altered the nature of the crime that is responsible for the monster's perverse reproductive prowess. Whereas Lucan did not include the theme of the rape of Medusa because it was irrelevant to the aim of his allegoric excursus (which was to highlight the magnitude of the extent to which the 'murder' of the Roman Republic was evil: bringing in Neptune would have lessened the impact of the Caesar-Perseus / Republic-Medusa allegory), Milton – for a very similar purpose – gave great prominence to the theme of Medusa's rape as a means of associating incest with monarchy. Thus, by comparing a passage in the second book of Milton's *Paradise Lost* with corresponding passages in the so-called "Medusa excursus" in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, we have seen just how much the English poet here owes to Lucan, both on a thematic and on a compositional level. In both epics, the monsters in question are at the same time allegories and sinister harbingers of evils that are to come.

Seen against the background of Milton's political views (which he shared to a considerable extent with Lucan) and given his fascination with the Roman poet, it would seem that all the similarities between Sin and Medusa are far too striking to be attributable to mere coincidence. A close reading of the passage of *Paradise Lost* in question together with its two intertexts has also revealed that Spenser – i.e. the author of Milton's confirmed hypotext – probably also drew (in part) on the Lucanian model when he created his monster. It would also appear that – in spite of all appearances to the contrary – in some respects the figure of Sin actually has more in common with its Latin source, especially in that it faithfully follows the Lucanian pat-

tern of an evil that results in an oxymoronically deadly procreation by a wronged monster, bringing about a macabre and never-ending *perpetuum mobile* of evil.

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